

# RESEARCH MATTERS

*News from the Senate Research Center*

## Does School Size Matter? Schools Within A School

November 2002



### Small Schools Produce:

- Better attendance and graduation rates, especially for those most likely to drop out,
- Higher test scores,
- More focus on academics,
- Increased student satisfaction,
- Enhanced instructional quality and teacher job satisfaction,
- Increased parent involvement, and
- Higher rates of employment and college enrollment.

School finance discussions continue to dominate education talk. Over the last decade and coinciding with equalized school funding, Texas students have recorded remarkable improvement in scores on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS), especially among economically disadvantaged and minority students in math and reading. In spring 2003, the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) will replace TAAS, testing additional subjects and ninth- and eleventh-grade students for the first time.

Generally, the goals of school reform include improving both student graduation rates and skills. Despite recent gains, low-income students, especially Hispanic students, continue to drop out of school at alarmingly high rates. In some districts, up to 50 percent of Hispanic students disappear from school rolls between seventh and twelfth grade.

Although socio-economic status is the best indicator of school success, small school size ranks second in improving student outcomes in all areas. In the 1980s and 1990s, large-scale research projects and reviews overwhelmingly confirmed the superiority of small schools.

Students in smaller schools build stronger relationships with teachers and fellow students. Small school enrollment has been shown to reduce student misbehavior, violations of school rules, suspensions, expulsions, and violence.

The essential elements for a successful small school include:

- autonomy;
- inclusive admissions;
- a cohesive environment;
- mutual support among staff;
- site-based control of employment, educational, and budgetary decisions;
- academic rigor;
- high standards; and
- professional development for teachers to challenge all students.

Most researchers have concluded that small school size is crucial for improving the performance of low-income students and have recommended that school size should decrease as the proportion of low-income students grows. One study showed that smaller schools reduced the effects of poverty on achievement by 50 percent; however, a few studies have shown no change in student achievement or mixed results.



Crowded classrooms and half-day sessions are a tragic waste of our greatest national resources  
- the minds of our children.

— Walt Disney

In spite of the consensus, districts continue building larger middle, junior high, and high schools, some of which enroll up to 5,000 students. Nearly 60 percent of high school students attend schools with enrollments above 1,000.

In a world populated by gargantuan school buildings, how does a district convert to smaller schools? Schools within a school (SWAS) is a concept that divides a large student body into smaller operational units. For example, specific groups of students would attend most of the same classes and share teachers, principal, and support staff.

In the last 40 years, a few districts chose to maintain small high schools. Texas rural-school advocates, when defending their high cost per pupil, consistently report that their students, mostly low-income, perform better than students in large comprehensive high schools. Many urban schools have adopted SWAS formats, and suburban districts have begun experimenting with the concept to provide a more engaging and productive atmosphere for students.

Researchers differ on the optimum number of students; recommendations range from 200 students to 900 students in secondary schools and 300 to 400 in elementary schools. Some argue that enrollment should be limited to fewer than 400 students in all schools.

Small schools cost slightly more per pupil than their large counterparts, but when based on cost per graduate, small schools prove to be less expensive as well as more effective. Critics contend that small schools cannot provide the comprehensive curriculum found in large high schools, but other researchers have found that a school with 400 students can offer an adequate education. Measures such as distance learning can expand the curriculum.

Shifting from large to small student bodies requires planning, resources, and restructuring. The U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) has funded grants used for such transitions through its Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Program. Smaller Learning Communities, another USDOE grant program, saw its budget nearly triple last year to \$125 million.



**The cost  
per graduate is  
lower for SWAS  
than in large  
comprehensive  
high schools.**

Large cities nationwide, including Baltimore, Chicago, New York City, and Philadelphia have downsized more than 300 schools over the last 15 years, often prodded by community and parent groups. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has provided \$1.6 billion to public schools and school districts to fund small school initiatives. It has granted an additional \$1.13 billion to universities, advocacy groups, foundations, and schools to promote such programs. The Annenberg Foundation and the Pew Charitable Trust also award grants to plan and implement small schools programs.

Five years ago, the Dallas-area South Grand Prairie High School (SGP) split its 2,500 students among five career academies specializing in business and computer technology; the creative and performing arts; health, science and human services; communication, humanities, and law; and math, science, and engineering. Student attendance and test scores improved, and fewer students dropped out. The number of advanced placement courses increased from 16 to 27, and the number of students taking advanced

placement exams increased tenfold. The Texas Education Agency recognized SGP as a School of Excellence. It is one of four high schools nationwide selected to work with the University of California - Berkeley on whole school academies.

Five common errors or areas of concern in planning a SWAS transition have been identified as follows:

- In converting to SWAS, autonomy of the smaller units can be destroyed by retaining centralized activities such as interscholastic competitions, clubs, bands, food service, counseling, and discipline, because the activities remain impersonal and remote from SWAS.
- Schools with more than 400 students and 25 or more teachers can experience the same communication problems as large schools where principals or governance councils set the school vision.
- Continuity can be destroyed when a SWAS plan serves specific grades, such as a ninth-grade center or a senior academy, because just as students become adjusted to one setting, they transfer into a new one.
- Continuing to offer an extensive selection of electives available to all students requires schools to adhere to a regular class schedule that limits the small school's ability to do independent projects.
- Finally, large schools' primary functions must be to control the hordes of anonymous adolescents confined within its classrooms, but in SWAS, students become well-known and trusted to use freedom of movement both within the school and community to pursue a wide variety of learning activities.

Assistance for transitioning to a SWAS is available from the Small Schools Workshops at the University of Illinois at Chicago ([www.smallschoolsworkshop.org](http://www.smallschoolsworkshop.org)) and the Small Schools Project of the Center on Reinventing Public Education at the University of Washington.

—by Betsy Heard, SRC

---

### Sources

---

#### **U.S. Department of Education**

[http://www.ed.gov/databases/ERIC\\_Digests/ed372897.html](http://www.ed.gov/databases/ERIC_Digests/ed372897.html)  
[http://www.ed.gov/databases/ERIC\\_Digests/ed265988.html](http://www.ed.gov/databases/ERIC_Digests/ed265988.html)  
[http://www.ed.gov/databases/ERIC\\_Digests/ed425049.html](http://www.ed.gov/databases/ERIC_Digests/ed425049.html)  
<http://www.ael.org/eric/digests/edorc01-6.html>

#### **The Appalachia Regional Education Laboratory**

<http://www.ael.org/eric/digest/edoea975.htm>

#### **The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Possibilities Education Update**

<http://gatesfoundation.org/education/resourcesresearch/keyissueschoolsize.htm>

#### **The Breakup: Suburbs Try Smaller High Schools**

<http://www.edweek.org/ewstory.cfm?slug=33hs.h20&key words=small%20school>